The Sigma SD1

Sigma has been producing DSLRs aimed at the professional market for several years now, and its latest model ups the ante still further with more resolution than ever and a hefty £6000+ price tag

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LET'S face it, I have the best job in the world. I get to take photographs all day (which I still love doing) and, thanks to the editor letting me loose on test equipment, I get to try out the latest kit pretty much before anyone else gets their hands on it. Kid and sweetie shop springs to mind! Occasionally, and only occasionally, this can get even better. Like being one of the first people in the UK to get their hands on the new Sigma SD1 for review! Result! The timing couldn't be better either, and with a studio full of sexy product just begging to be photographed and a model shoot on the horizon, the SD1 should feel right at home.

Now all of us have heard of Sigma, and while this is a company with a huge reputation for the quality of the lenses it produces, it is far less well known for its cameras, especially those that are pitched at the pro arena. Sigma is hoping that all this is about to change however. Its new SD1 flagship has been specifically designed to offer what is described as medium-format quality in a DSLR body, and it does this with the aid of the largest Foveon sensor ever made. Impressively this has the capacity to deliver a reputed 46MP (albeit in APS-C format), which should help to sort the men from the boys...

The camera in action

So, what do you get for £6199.99 body only? A lightweight weather-sealed magnesium body, 77 segment metering system, 11 point cross hair focus sensors, internal dust filter, 3in 460,000 pixel LCD screen and, of course, that tantalising promise of 'medium-format quality'.

RIGHT: Using the SD1 for fashion shoots can be very rewarding in terms of image quality. The detail is excellent but performance is let down by a small internal buffer causing very slow operation. Such a shame as the quality of images in this type of controlled environment is as good as it gets from a DSLR

First impressions of the SD1 are a welcome surprise to be honest. Sigma isn't renowned for making pretty cameras, and indeed the SD1 wouldn't win any beauty prizes, but in my opinion it is by far the best looking camera Sigma has ever produced. Its sculpted grip is a pleasure to hold and the non-stick coating on the camera is second to none. It feels well built (as most Sigma cameras do) and should be able to take the rigours of a pro life very well.

The 3in LCD screen is good (if rather blue) and most of the button placement has been very well thought through, the exposure compensation button being the exception. Who thought of putting it right next to the shutter button? Don't get me wrong, it doesn't get in the way, but take a look at the product shots and see what you think. To me it just looks plain odd!

Sigma SD1

- Price: £6199.99
- www.sigma-imaging-uk.com
- Storage: Compact Flash
- Lens Mount: Sigma SA bayonet mount
- Lens Magnification: Approx 1.5x
- Image Sensor: X3 direct image sensor (CMOS)
- Effective Pixels 46MP (3 layers)
- Aspect Ratio 3:2
- Viewfinder Frame Coverage: 98% vertical, 98% horizontal
- Auto Focus: Type TTL phase difference detection system
- AF Point: 11 points twin cross sensor
- AF Point Selection: Automatic Selection, Manual Selection
- Active AF point indicator: Superimposed in viewfinder
- Built-in Flash: Manual Pop-up
- Flash Synch Speed: 1/180sec
- LCD Monitor: TFT 3in LCD
- Dimensions 145.5mm x 112.5mm x 80mm
- Weight: 700g

"Outside the studio the SD1 proved to be a capable performer but not outstanding"

With the SD1 Sigma is clearly going for the studio market and the company seems to be aiming higher than rivals such as Canon, Nikon and Sony if the price is anything to go by. So what better way to test out the camera than to spend ten days putting it through its paces in my busy studio on a real job? A real baptism of fire that I wouldn't wish on any new model!

Now let me say at the outset that I expect a great deal from my kit and I am very fussy when it comes to image quality and usability, especially when working in a very dark studio, under pressure with demanding clients on site. Getting to grips with any new camera system is always a learning curve and the SD1 proved to be no exception. As always (because I am a man) I bumbled around the menu systems for a while and then resorted to the instructions for the final pieces of the jigsaw. To be honest it was all quite straightforward, and I encountered no more than a couple of areas of uncertainty, which is a testament to Sigma. The instruction manual also proved to be well written on the odd occasion when I simply had to admit defeat.

The main menu system on the camera is quite utilitarian but functional none the less, and the Quick Selection menu is nice and easy to use and allows you to make most of the regular adjustments you are likely to need. Being a commercial shooter the fact that the 'mirror-up' control is located on the main control dial is a joy to behold (Canon please take note; it isn't rocket science) and everything else fell into the hand very easily. Even in the dark I was able to navigate around the body very easily after a couple of hours. So much so that it felt strange going back to my Canon, where I achieved lots of wrong button pushes! Battery life I also found was excellent over the period of the test, and this appears to be at least as good as anything else out there on the market at the moment. A small point but important.

All that said there are a number of omissions and some quite serious usability issues when using the SD1. There is no Live View for example, which makes critical focus on small/medium products extremely difficult and a rather hit and miss affair. With the entire current crop of high-end DSLRs having this function right now, and seeing the kind of market Sigma is aiming at, it seems a strange and unforgivable omission.

Trying to remedy this omission by using the new autofocus system doesn't help too much either as the SD1 has a tendency to hunt in low light levels. In a commercial environment colour is everything and although the SD1 does allow for custom white-balancing it does not allow the user to dial in specific Kelvin values. This may seem minor but when shooting low-key product with anything but flash, getting a correct custom white-balance isn't always possible. If, however, you know the colour of your lights this function is invaluable and the fact is that it is readily available on other camera systems aimed at a much lower section of the market, and really should be found here.

On the subject of colour the SD1 does err a little on the magenta side of things but no more than other systems, but the blue bias offered by the LCD is quite off-putting.

ABOVE: **The Foveon chip really does produce smooth and silky images with both highlight and shadow detail. The tonality from the SD1 images is excellent and requires less sharpening than its predecessors**

This however is just a characteristic of the screen itself and the images themselves are actually fine when you pull them up.

The main problem I encountered while giving the SD1 a thorough workout, and this in my opinion is the camera's Achilles heel, is its internal buffer. Even using top spec Compact Flash cards, the average time from shutter release to being able to view and zoom in on an image – to check focus for example – is 15 seconds for a Raw image! This time is further increased when long exposures are taken. This may not seem much but, by comparison, my 5D Mark II takes just two seconds. Even on a still life shoot this is an age, and if you happen to be working on a portrait or fashion shoot it quickly becomes unworkable. When shooting a model portfolio for a prospective model I ended up using JPEG capture when shooting to speed things up. Don't get me wrong, the JPEGs were excellent but I would have infinitely preferred Raw. Another area where the SD1 misses out, and again this may increasingly be an issue for some, is in the fact that there is no provision for video capture. It doesn't happen to be an issue for me but at this price bracket adding a pop up flash while missing out the new buzz toy seems like a strange decision.

ABOVE: **On this image of fresh Sushi the SD1 really shows its pedigree. With a little coaxing and good glass the level of detail is wonderful**

Image quality

From what I saw there is no doubt that the SD1 can produce superb results in the studio. Is it medium-format quality? Unfortunately I would say not. Image quality is comparable to my Canon 5D Mark II – which is no mean feat – but rendered no more detail when you examined files side by side.

Although there is plenty of detail in the images, where the SD1 lags behind – even to sub £1000 DSLRs – is when it comes to ISO performance. The Foveon chip does not have a great reputation for even mild ISO levels and, unfortunately, the SD1 still suffers from this design trait, something that is clearly visible from the inset images. The SD1 introduces high levels of noise from ISO 800 upwards and colour saturation all but disappears at anything from ISO 1600 and above. In the studio this wouldn't matter too much, and there are lots of good noise reduction software packages available, but at this price bracket I am sure most purchasers would require more.

Once I took the SD1 outside the studio it proved itself to be a capable performer but not outstanding. Again the level of detail in the images is excellent, but the metering is a little erratic and, although the autofocus is very good, in bright light at least, it is not as good as high-end Canons or Nikons.

I have in the past raved about the Foveon sensor and landscapes and the SD1 takes this to another level completely with smooth tones, vibrant colours, and a whole new level of detail. In addition to this a fantastic selling point of Sigma cameras, and indeed the whole Foveon sensor line-up, is the ability to take out the dust filter to allow the camera to become fully infrared. Being this user friendly and easy to achieve means the SD1 can handle both full visible spectrum and infrared pretty much at will, so no need for two camera bodies in the future!

Back at the computer, processing of the SD1 files is undertaken, for the time being at least, by Sigma's own Raw processing software, Photo Pro 5. This turned out to be nicely designed and surprisingly efficient. ›

"The biggest problem of all is that the SD1 doesn't really fall into any category"

Conclusion

On reflection I have to say that Sigma should be applauded for taking on the big boys and tackling a market sector they seem very keen to conquer. The SD1 is by far the best camera that Sigma has produced to date by a long, long way; however, this alone may not be enough.

The SD1 produces files that are as good as those from Canon and Nikon's finest, but at a high cost: nearly three times as much as a 5D Mark II for example. I feel the biggest problem of all is that the SD1 doesn't really fall into any category. It isn't a pure studio camera due to some of the issues outlined.

It also suffers, in my opinion, from the fact that it features a Sigma-only lens mount, which means, for example, that you don't have access to any tilt and shift lenses, which are a must for commercial product photographers. This really could be a sticking point for some purchasers.

It isn't a studio fashion camera either, due to the poor write speed issues; however if this were to be addressed then it easily could be great for this kind of work. Outdoors the poor ISO performance is a real problem for the SD1 compared to pretty much all of its competitors.

The biggest issue I think the SD1 will encounter is its price, especially in the current global economic climate. Too much for too little I fear. With all of these reservations, will the camera be a game changer for Sigma? Only time will tell, but I would have to say it will face a struggle.

Scores:

Build quality: 5/5 Superbly built with little to fault.

Ease of use: 3/5
Easy to use from the outset but slow write speeds really hinder the camera's usability.

Image quality: 4/5
Image quality is good but in my opinion isn't really up to the medium-format promise

ABOVE:
As can be seen from these sample images high ISO isn't the SD1's strong point. Noise is edging in as low as 800 ISO and the images from just 1600 upwards are all but unusable with grain and desaturation very prevalent. At this price point this is a worrying characteristic

Thanks go out to both Sigma for such a long loan period and to Georgia (the model) for allowing me to use images from her very first shoot

ISO Comparison